

## Dialogue

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*Higher Education in the South Pacific: A Political Economy*

GEOFFREY CASTON

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THOMAS FARBER

*Robert E. Gibson, Educator and Advocate of Justice*

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## *Unhappy in the Isles of Oceania*

Thomas Farber

*The publication last year of Paul Theroux's The Happy Isles of Oceania: Paddling the Pacific has generated considerable reaction throughout the island region. THE CONTEMPORARY PACIFIC offers for its readers' consideration the provocative commentary of Thomas Farber, who, like Theroux, has written recently of his travels and experiences in the Pacific. A recipient of Guggenheim and National Endowment fellowships for his fiction, Farber has been Visiting Distinguished Writer at the University of Hawai'i, a Fulbright Scholar for Pacific Island Studies, and a Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center. —Editor*

In his remarkably mean-spirited account of traveling in the Pacific, *The Happy Isles of Oceania*, Paul Theroux is disabled with misery in the form of self-pity. Ah, lost love. The wife that got away, though in more than five hundred pages Theroux cannot bring himself to tell the reader just what went wrong. (In *My Secret History*, however, an earlier novel, Theroux's protagonist is a cuckolded travel writer who then betrays his wife.) Which leaves Theroux bitter and alone, speaking no indigenous tongue as he wanders in the clan- and family-oriented islands needing desperately to be acknowledged, valued. Loved. "They had no interest whatsoever in me," he writes of some Tongans in Vava'u. "They were incurious, indifferent, probably mocking." This drives Theroux crazy, has him imagining how under other circumstances "they would have groveled and paid fond attention to my butt."

Writing of the Trobriand Islanders, Theroux can't stand his place in Pacific history, has himself saying to some boys, "Don't call me *dim-dim*. I come from America." Poor Theroux-in-Oceania, simply one more *palangi* tourist with money to blow, arriving by plane and rent-a-car and making long-distance calls in a region of subsistence farmers. Little cash here, but also very little anomie. Theroux thus some kind of breathing parable of atomistic capitalism, the solitary self with credit card. Theroux camping on private property whenever it suits him—"The idea of trespassing ex-

cited me”—and then disappearing to still another island nation, dazzlingly rich by Islanders’ standards but denying he’s rich when they ask: an occupational hazard of wealth, to feel poor. To poor-mouth. Theroux special among tourists—if at all—for having a skin too thin to withstand Polynesian teasing.

Theroux, great yuppie boatman in his folding kayak, toting Walkman and wine. What a devolution in the two hundred years since Captain Cook! Theroux, however, like the Cook of the last voyage, enraged by insolent natives, albeit politically correct on French nuclear testing and Japanese resorts. Taking moral credit for opinions of no great personal cost to him, opinions that too easily deflect appraisal of Theroux’s own behavior. In fact, paddling around, Theroux seems happiest when there are no natives to have to deal with, or when, as in Hawai’i, they have been disenfranchised and suppressed, leaving the paddling tourist free to savor environment-as-paradise.

*The Happy Isles of Oceania* is thus Theroux’s revenge on Pacific Islanders, consonant with how he’s (re)lived his life of travel in previous books, making a virtue of truculence, caricaturing, diminishing, many of those he encounters. Truly stealing their magic, not, as Theroux would have it, because he’s a writer and that’s what writers do, but because he’s cast himself as the George Steinbrenner or Spiro Agnew of travel writers. On drinking kava, a ceremony with such ancient resonances: “I sat and clapped a little.” And of Tongans: “They were usually late, unapologetic, envious, abrupt, lazy, mocking, quarrelsome, and peculiarly sadistic to their children.” Not satisfied with forever giving himself the best lines in the arguments he records—writing as wish fulfillment—Theroux keeps checking to see if the natives actually eat dog; is obsessed with their size and weight—hearing the chafing of thighs, he says; and, his essential psychological dynamic, looking for get-back. “I liked hearing stories of Polynesian seasickness.” And, “I had assumed that, being Polynesians, they would be puking their guts out.” For Theroux, people whose ancestors reached the islands by sailing vessel should now, generations later, be comfortable on the open ocean. Theroux gloats, of course, because they’re sick and he’s not. (In *My Secret History*, Theroux’s travel writer shoots his wife’s lover with a urine-filled squirt gun.)

Should Pacific Islanders read Theroux’s disjointed and sloppily repetitive narrative, should they see him laboring to implicate the reader in his slanders, they may not deplore what happened to Theroux when he

reached O'ahu. "On my first swim in Hawaii," Theroux writes, "I was yanked by the undertow [*sic*], carried past the surf zone, and swept into a strong current almost a mile [*sic*] from my towel. I swam hard upstream [*sic*] for an hour [*sic*] and finally struggled ashore on sharp rocks, where I was lacerated and shaken . . . people said this happened to newcomers all the time."

Well, not to all newcomers, actually. Were Theroux telling this story about others, he'd argue that such a fate is only for those who've made little effort to understand the Pacific.